Pre Swan Song

Part 1

"Are we fighting?" I asked, while drying my younger sister with a towel one day.

"We are fighting," she echoed my words, without looking at me, her back turned. She wasn't listening. I sighed, as if it was an expected reaction.

Her gaze slipped past my shoulder, towards the TV behind me. Her favorite commercial was playing on the screen. Humming the commercial song, she pulled away from my hands, left the dressing area, and began walking towards the TV.

"Hey, put your clothes on."

"Hey, put your clothes on," she repeated, still not looking back. Droplets of water fell from her body onto the tatami mats. As she walked, she scratched her breast with a child-like, casual motion. The curves of her body were already those of a woman. The fact that she was maturing physically, before her mind, made me uneasy. She was already the same height as me, her older sister.

My younger sister was a little different.

She couldn't behave like others. She couldn't think like others. She couldn't feel like others. And probably, she didn't even realize that she was different.

For example...

"Aroe," I called out her name. I knew she probably wouldn't respond, still staring at the TV. She would likely be swaying her upper body back and forth, as she fixated on the screen.

"Aroe," I repeated, a little louder. Still, she didn't take her eyes off the TV. A commercial for a health drink was playing on the screen. Maybe at that moment, she was chanting “Tough Beam, Tough Beam,” in a monotonous voice, mixing the product name into the catchphrase.

She wasn't interested in the product or the content of the images. She was captivated by the stimulation of the rapidly changing scenes, and the catchy commercial song. Ever since she was little, my sister had a strong fixation on flashing lights and repeating sounds. Giving her something that lit up or made noise would keep her entertained endlessly. She seemed to like regularly repeating stimuli.

TV commercials, with the same content played multiple times a day, were the perfect entertainment for her. She liked them even more than the TV programs themselves. Her eyes wide, lips slightly parted, she watched the screen intently.

"Aroe," I called out for the third time. Still, she wouldn't turn around. She must be able to hear me. If there was a sound she liked, or even disliked, even if it was a small sound I might not even notice, she would respond immediately. Her hearing was fine. She must hear me calling, but perhaps my way of speaking wasn't getting through. So, if I told her specifically,

"Aroe, look at me,"

She would turn around. I thought that might work. But maybe it wouldn't. It was difficult to get her to communicate her intentions. My sister had only a very limited capacity for communication.

People usually, just by hearing their name called, even if only their name, can get an idea of what was expected of them based on the tone of the voice and the situation. Even very young children will know that they are being reprimanded if you call their name in a harsh tone when they are doing something they shouldn't. But my sister doesn't have that. Her lack of response doesn't mean she's trying to defy me. She really just doesn't understand.

And from my end, it was difficult to understand her feelings. If I took my eyes off her, she would make a mess of the room, or repeat words that didn't make sense. She must have her own logic, but I couldn't understand the logic of her mind. It was a different system. Someone once said she was like an alien child.

This was a major difficulty for my sister in living with others. The doctors diagnosed her with autism. There's no real cure for this disorder as of yet.

"It's like someone who has lost their legs and can't grow them back," the doctor said in the consultation room. While it wasn't possible to eliminate the fundamental difficulties, just like wheelchairs and prosthetic limbs, combined with the effort from the person themselves and those around them can improve the lives of those who had lost legs, the difficulties faced by those with autism can be solved with technology and knowledge.

However, since the disorder is invisible, we have to try our best through accumulated knowledge and effort to figure out what we could do and how we could do it.

It would help if Aroe could understand this.

Part 2

The peaks of the mountains surrounding the town were covered in snow, completely white. It was the middle of December and the world was becoming more chaotic towards the end of the year, but the atmosphere at my company was unusually calm. Everyone was working at a leisurely pace, a mixture of the sentimental feeling that the year was coming to an end and the excitement for Christmas was in the air.

That day, my work was mostly finished by about 5 PM, and I was killing time at my desk until 6 PM. Normally, I couldn't even imagine having nothing to do. Even if I spent a holiday at home, I would always be busy doing something. It was natural for me to always be moving my body or head. So when I suddenly had time when I wasn't doing anything, I felt like I was doing something bad.

Wondering if there was anything to do, I checked the documents and files that I had already made once, but there was no more work to do.

"Yasakura-san,"

While I was uncomfortably standing by my chair, Tsukishima-kun, who was in the same year as me at work and had also been my acquaintance since high school, called out to me.

"Would you like some coffee?"

I took the coffee he offered.

"It's quiet for the end of the year. Is this company going to go bust?"

He laughed as he said so. He wasn't particularly handsome, but his strong body and refreshing, friendly smile made him popular with the girls in the company. In high school, he was the captain of the baseball team, and was quite popular back then too.

"On the other hand, it looks like it'll be tough after the New Year,"

After saying that, I was about to take a sip of my coffee, but I noticed a scent that was different from usual.

"Wait, isn't that expensive coffee from the manager's private stash?"

“Ah, I might’ve made a mistake.”

Tsukishima-kun feigned innocence, but there was no way he could’ve mistaken the coffee from the coffee machine and this one.

“Well, I think the manager can at least give us this little treat.”

He said so with a smile.

“Us?”

I looked around. The manager had just left his seat. Everyone in the team was sipping freshly brewed coffee. Before I knew it, the office was filled with the pleasant smell of coffee.

"I don't know anything about that."

"It's okay. The manager pretends to be a connoisseur, but he can’t tell the difference. The other day, I brought him instant coffee when he asked for some, and he didn’t even notice. I’ve confirmed it.”

“You’re so well-prepared.”

I couldn’t help but laugh wryly.

“Oh, good.”

“Huh?”

“You smiled just now. You’re really cute when you smile.”

“Don’t say such creepy things. You startled me.”

“Don’t say ‘creepy’. You haven’t been smiling much lately, so I was worried about you.”

As if those were his true feelings, he looked at me with an intense look, his smile gone.

“Really?”

“Yeah. You always seem to be working too hard and sighing all the time. You look tired.”

“Hmm…”

“Well, I think you’re cute even when you don’t smile.”

“Stop saying those things already.”

“What? I’m just pointing out what I think, as a colleague.”

Tsukishima-kun smiled. I was troubled and went silent.

“Tsukishima-san, stop hitting on Yasaka-san during work,”

Yamashita-san, sitting across from me, said. Tsukishima-kun looked embarrassed and scratched his head before going back to his seat.

I loosened my shoulders, which had stiffened without my realizing. When I was pulled into a private conversation, I tended to get strangely nervous.

Alone again, I took a sip of the manager's prized Blue Mountain. The soft and mild taste, without any bitterness, tasted delicious even for me, who doesn't particularly like coffee, and I let out a sigh of relief.

After work and shopping, I went to pick up Aroe at school. Aroe and I lived together. I couldn’t leave her alone because I didn’t know what she would do. So after school, she was looked after by volunteer students until I picked her up.

If I went to school at the usual time, Aroe was usually already ready to go home, waiting for me. She was very particular about time, and would get upset if I was too early or too late. However, even if I picked her up on time, she wouldn’t give me a particularly happy look. She would just approach me with a blank expression and quietly take my hand.

That day too, I received a brief report about the day from the student, Fukazawa, who usually looked after her. There were the usual problems, but nothing special happened. He also gave me a report on her current studies. Her main focus was on conversation training.

"She's made amazing progress recently," said Fukazawa, who looked very happy.

"Before, we could only repeat words while showing or bringing her something she wanted, but recently, she tries to communicate with words alone first. She has the desire to talk, but not being able to communicate properly is stressful for her. I think her usual panic episodes have decreased too, right? Don’t you think she’s gotten quieter overall?”

He had been volunteering for a year, and had been with us for a year and a half.

I thought Aroe had been improving lately. I had to admit that his was the lion's share of the credit. He seemed to have studied a lot, and had many new ideas. He failed often, but the results were much more than that.

It was him who suggested introducing a communication book to Aroe, whose conversation progress was not very good. Initially, I was worried about various things, but it turned out to be a complete success.

“However, what I don't understand is that while she seems to understand even complex words, she can't do simple things. Like not responding to her own name. No, she seems to know she’s being referred to, but she seems to think it’s the same as 'you', or 'hey', and sometimes uses them when referring to people herself. No matter how many times I teach

her, she doesn't get it right. I wonder if she remembers it wrong. If I call out her name carefully, she responds, so I guess it’s not particularly inconvenient in real life…”

“Oh, that’s…”

I interrupted him, thinking that he had noticed something, and continued my words.

"We used to grow aloe vera at home, and my mother would often talk to it, so maybe she can't distinguish between that and her own name."

“Hmm, is that possible?”

“Well, dogs also get their names mixed up like that, right?”

“That’s true, I guess…”

"But that's just an idea. It could be a completely different reason."

I covered that up as he started thinking about it.

“Anyway, I’ll look into it. It’s sad if she doesn’t know her own name properly.”

"Great tough beam, strong tough beam, 100,000 horsepower tough beam."

As we walked, Aroe was humming the TV commercial song. Humming was a sign that she was in a good mood, and it put my mind at ease.

Her singing didn’t really sound like singing, and people who passed by stared at her. I had become used to being in the spotlight with her like this. I didn't know if it was a good thing or a bad thing.

Holding her hand, I walked home. Aroe had a distinct walking habit, like a ballerina. She walked on her tiptoes, unstable and wobbly. It was a little noticeable, but it didn’t cause any real problems, and to my eyes it looked comical and cute.

As I walked, I thought about what Fukazawa-kun had said.

I thought there was a reason other than what I told Fukazawa-kun for Aroe not remembering her own name.

My mother, who had lived with us until two years ago, hated Aroe. Even after she was diagnosed with autism by a doctor, she didn’t learn anything about the condition and didn’t want her to get proper education. She would give her an excessive amount of strange medication until she threw up, and took her to a prayer ceremony saying she was possessed by a fox and made her get hit with a stick, and would be happy that Aroe was quiet for a couple of days, but she was only weakened to the point that she couldn't move. I thought that was how things were back then, but thinking about it now, I was terrified. Aroe, who was so insensitive to pain that she would be able to smile even if she had a sprained ankle, couldn't move, so how much had my mother hit her?

Of course, even then, Aroe's condition didn’t change. And she wasn’t going to change. My mother became desperate. She complained to everyone around her about how unlucky she was, she tried to make everyone understand her tragedy.

And whenever she had free time, she would verbally abuse Aroe to her face. Even if the people around her criticized her, she claimed that it didn't matter what she said because Aroe was stupid and couldn't understand words anyway, and that she had to endure so much, so she was justified in doing so.

And in fact, back then, she seemed to understand even less than she does now, and it seemed as if she couldn’t hear anything. This seemed to have intensified her mother’s frustration. When I was in high school, I once heard my mother talking to Aroe like this when I got back from school.

“Seriously, Aroe is such a nuisance. Why was she born such a failure? Thanks to Aroe, I’m always so embarrassed.”

It didn’t seem like Aroe understood the meaning of those words that my mother said with a smiling expression. She had her usual blank expression, didn’t react to the words, and when my mother tickled her, she would giggle with delight. "You're really stupid," she would make my mother laugh wryly.

My mother, who spent most of the day alone with Aroe because my father rarely came home, how many times had she spoken such words to her? Anyway, in this malicious game, the word "Aroe" was used as if it referred to someone who wasn't there. And I thought Aroe had grown up without being able to connect the name with herself.

If that memory was still in Aroe's head, it would be better if she never knew her own name. It was sad for Fukazawa-kun, who said he would look into it, and even if she knew it, Aroe probably wouldn’t be hurt by it.

"Welcome home."

"I'm home,"

"Yes."

Aroe carefully placed her shoes in their usual spot while replying. Then, not liking the place of my boots, she moved them about 2 centimeters.

Tonight’s dinner is Japanese food. Kinpira Gobo is the highlight. Aroe doesn't like foods that are chewy. How to get her to eat it is my challenge.

I sat facing her at the table, observing her eating while eating my own food. Kinpira Gobo was in Aroe's favorite colorful glass bowl. She glanced at it two or three times, but the fork she was holding did not reach the bowl.

I picked up a piece of gobo from her bowl and ate it myself. Aroe, whose territory had been invaded, stared at me.

"The gobo is delicious."

When I smiled, Aroe looked at the bowl.

"Please try it."

"No."

"Ah."

She managed to reply without using the communication book. Although it was a simple word, I was so happy that

"You spoke well,"

I was about to praise her, but stopped myself. The reply itself was selfish, saying that she didn't want to eat Kinpira Gobo. I shouldn't praise her for this. I was often told that I was spoiling Aroe too much. I had to pull myself together and ask back.

"Why not?"

"Why not?"

"Do you dislike Kinpira Gobo?"

"Dislike gobo?"

Right after I was about to praise her, echo speech came out. And she seemed to not want to eat the Kinpira Gobo at all. I was disappointed and sighed.

In the end, my trial and error was useless. She only nibbled half the carrot and finished her meal without touching the kinpira.

After the meal, Aroe’s role was to take the empty dishes to the sink, including mine. The fact that she would dutifully help with the housework every day was a habit that was much better than normal children of the same age. The only downside was that sometimes she would take the dishes even if I hadn’t finished eating yet.

When there were no more dishes on the table, Aroe sat on her chair and placed both her palms flat on the table. She was waiting for me to give her after-dinner coffee. For some reason, this child liked drinking her coffee black more than sweets or juice.

If I was slow to set out the mugs, she would frown, pick out a word from her book, and repeat it until the coffee came.

"Coffee please."

"Coffee please."

She knew there wouldn’t be a second cup, so she would spend time drinking her one cup.

"You like coffee, but you never get pimples,"

I said, looking at Aroe's smooth skin, but of course, there was no reaction. She held her mug with both hands, and looked as serious as if she was a test-taker at an exam hall.

It was true that she would sometimes have trouble sleeping, so I preferred to avoid giving her coffee at night, but looking at her focused expression, I thought she deserved at least that much joy in her life.

When she was quiet like this, I noticed how beautiful Aroe’s features were. And in fact, people often admired her for it. But for me, as her guardian, this was a great risk factor that led to unnecessary danger, so I couldn’t be completely happy about it.

If she had been neurotypical, she would have had so many suitors. She would have gone to a regular class, and had boyfriends and breakups. What kind of sisters would we have been then? We might have gone to a department store together and argued over what trendy clothes to choose. We might have been able to confide in each other about our problems.

What was she thinking in this world where there was less of an easy exchange than with others? Even though she had started to talk a little more, she only ever talked about simple and specific things like what she wanted or what she didn’t like. She had never talked about what was in her heart. She had never once spoken about abstract matters such as what she was thinking. No one knows her true feelings, and she doesn't try to make us understand. Didn't Aroe feel lonely?

After dinner, it was bath time. Once I had seen Aroe wrapped up in her pajamas, it was my turn. I soaked up to my shoulders in the hot water, inhaled the refreshing scent of the bath salts deep into my nose, and exhaled it with a sigh. Then, I could hear Aroe's voice. She was singing again. I was sure she was watching TV.

The time in the bath was the most healing time for me. There were hot springs in this town, but I preferred relaxing alone in my own bath, more than the public baths. I preferred the water temperature closer to my body temperature, so I had to put up with it being hot in public baths.

When I relaxed my body in the water that was close to my body temperature, it felt like my skin was melting away. I imagined how pleasant it would be if I really did melt away. There was so much trouble in continuing to be myself.

I was a little shocked that I was told I didn't smile at work. When I was out, I thought I was being friendly enough, but was I so clearly lacking in composure?

If that was the case, I was sure it was because of the phone call I had received from my mother the other day.

"Are you still taking care of Aroe?"

This was the question my mother always asked when we talked.

After divorcing my father, my mother went back to her parents' house in the next town because she didn't want to live in this house anymore. And she even tried to sell the house and use the money to put Aroe in some facility because she didn't want to raise her anymore. That was when I had just finished university and started working, and I was able to convince my mother to let me stay and take care of Aroe.

"Of course. I'm not like you."

My reply came out in a confrontational tone.

"That child is sick. There's no way such an animal can live together with humans."

My mother continued speaking, ignoring my animosity, and putting a worried tone into her voice. Her fake concern made me even more irritated.

"She's not sick, she has a disability. And she doesn't bite and make me bleed anymore. Things have gotten much better since you were around."

"So, she's going to get better?"

"That's why, Aroe's disability isn't something that gets better or anything…"

"She's going to be like this her whole life, isn't she? The doctor said so, didn't he? It's a waste of effort to try."

I thought that wasn't true, but I didn't want to admit it. When I went silent, my mother started talking as if she had won.

"You've done enough. You can think about yourself now. You're still young, you know? Is it okay if you get old while taking care of Aroe, with no prospect of recovery? It isn't, is it? There's no reason to ruin your life by getting involved with something like that. You're not fully independent yet, but you've done a good job. You shouldn't be ashamed. I'm the one to blame, so you don't have to feel any responsibility. That child won't thank you for anything. She won't even cry if you die. She doesn't understand anything anyway."

"That doesn't matter."

I hated the fact that my voice had lost its strength.

"Hey, it was my fault. I know that. So please, you should think about your own life…"

I hung up before my mother could finish. Looking at the silent cell phone, tears suddenly spilled out and sobs escaped from my throat. I couldn't stop crying. As I cried, I wondered why I was crying. I hated my impulsive and self-centered mother. It wasn't right for me to be made to cry by her words.

I had nowhere to go and I couldn't go anywhere. This was my place. And it was something I had chosen myself. I was born into the same environment, but I had been more privileged

than my sister. I had a responsibility to do things for her that she couldn’t do. It was only natural that I should give her a part of my life. That was definitely the case. What I was doing was definitely not wrong. It shouldn’t be wrong.

As I was telling myself that, I felt dizzy, so I got out of the bathroom. I dried my body and got dressed. Even so, my anxiety still dominated my heart and I felt lonely and scared.

“Aroe,”

I called to Aroe, whose profile was facing the TV. She was definitely hearing me, but she didn't react.

“Aroe,”

I called out a second and third time with feeling, but she still didn't look back.

"Aroe, look at me."

My sister didn't turn around, and was swaying her upper body gently.

I felt like crying.

Part 3

"What are you doing for Christmas?"

Tsukishima-kun called out to me as I was about to leave work. He was twirling a car keychain in his right hand, making the chain jingle.

"It's next weekend. Do you have any plans?"

"I'll be at home with my sister."

“You said that last year too.”

“Really? You remember it well.”

“Yeah, you rejected my invitation last year too.”

He chuckled under the bluish-white streetlights. His teeth were exceptionally white.

“Do you really have to spend it with your sister?”

“Yeah, I think so.”

“If your schedule opens up, let me know, okay?”

“I’m afraid it won’t open up.”

“I’ll keep my schedule free either way. Also, today’s Friday, right? What about just a little while now?”

“Sorry, I can’t do that either. I’m always sorry.”

“I knew it. I was just asking. I’ll keep the weekend free as much as possible.”

“You don’t have to do that for me.”

He didn't care about my reply, waved, and started walking towards the parking lot. He had a broad back. I thought he should leave me alone and focus on someone else. The more he talked about ordinary things that young people would talk about, the more he seemed like someone from a distant, different world.

When I thought about Christmas, it was true that the streets were lit up with illuminations and decorations. Supermarkets were playing “Jingle Bells.”

On Christmas Eve, I would usually attend a Christmas party with Aroe, hosted by the parents at her school. Last year, we hosted it at our place, and everyone had been busy preparing for it for a long time before. This year, I had not been asked to help with the preparation. But I was still planning on attending the party.

"Ah, everyone's just trying to be considerate,"

Fukazawa-kun said when I asked him about it as I was picking Aroe up.

"Huh? What do you mean, considerate?"

"Well, you work, right? Most of the others are full-time housewives. They said that it was okay if you only came on the day of the party, and not help prepare.”

"But I feel bad, and it makes it harder to go to the party."

"I don't think you should worry about it. Oh, and there's a message for you."

"A message?"

“They said that if you have any personal things you need to do, they’d be happy to look after Aroe for the day.”

The lady who was organizing it this year was looking out for me. Since I was of age, I was sure I had something I wanted to do on special events.

"I'll look after her after the party,"

He said. I was about to say that I would be in trouble if he did that. Then, I remembered Tsukishima-kun's invitation. If I could rely on his words, there was a

chance I might have something to do. Maybe I should go?

After thinking that far, I felt embarrassed that I was actually not against Tsukishima-kun's invitation. Was that really how I felt?

“Is there something going on?”

"No, there's nothing, yet..."

“It’s okay. I’m going to be there this year too, and I think they’ve got enough people.”

“But…”

“Ah, what’s wrong? Your face is red?”

“Eh…”

I covered my face.

“Ah what’s wrong your face is red.”

Aroe, who was looking out the window, was now beside me and suddenly said that.

Then, she took my hand. This made me say goodbye to Fukazawa-kun and rush out of there.

“This is a problem.”

“This is a problem.”

“Christmas, huh.”

“Christmas, huh.”

“I’m not used to being confused about something like this, I don’t know what I should do.”

“Don’t know what I should do.”

On the way back from school, I stopped and turned Aroe to face me before asking her.

“Aroe, are you going to be okay being alone at Christmas?”

“Yes.”

Whenever she answers so quickly with “yes,” she never understands what I'm saying.

"I know you don't feel lonely, though."

Ignoring her, I muttered to myself.

“Great tough beam, strong tough beam…”

Aroe, free from my gaze, turned around and began to sing.

“It’s my own problem after all. Deciding for myself is hard.”

“100,000 horsepower tough beam.”

What did people who passed us by think of the sisters who were muttering to themselves as they walked?

Part 4

It was a Sunday afternoon. A cold wind was blowing outside, but inside the room, the heater was on full blast, making it feel like spring. Wearing a T-shirt and hot pants, I was lying on my stomach with a cushion clutched to my chest, adjusting Aroe’s communication book.

The communication book had a lot of cards with illustrations and words. People with autism have difficulty with verbal skills, but they have a stronger ability to recognize things from a visual perspective. They can communicate more easily if things that they can't understand verbally are written or drawn and read. So by compiling these visual representations of words into a file that can be carried and referred to anytime, the idea was to support their daily verbal skills.

When she was still getting used to it, she would show a page to other people and point at the card to convey her intentions, but now she can look at the cards herself and construct words to speak.

As we use it, there were some words that were lacking and words that were there but never used. Each time we found this, Aroe’s teacher and Fukazawa-kun would give me notes. Using their feedback, I would construct the content of the book to make it easier for Aroe to communicate without stress. This was for her and for the people around her, including myself.

The sunlight that was coming in through the glass felt warm on my skin. Aroe was making a chain of decorations using shiny gold and silver colored paper that she loved. They were for the Christmas decorations in the room.

On a quiet, peaceful afternoon, as I was holding a card, I realized I was looking at my cell phone next to me. If I was free on Christmas Eve, I should contact Tsukishima-kun soon. Even in this remote rural town, or perhaps because it’s a rural town, places that people gathered would get booked up quickly. I had to decide soon. First of all, that was just proper etiquette. It was rude to be so deliberately coy.

No, wait, when did I decide to go out with him? And even if we went out, what would we do?

I was thinking too much, and my face started to feel hot. I hated that.

Still holding the card, I looked at Aroe.

“Hey, Aroe-san, can I ask you something?”

“Yes,”

Aroe responded immediately. I continued, not caring.

"I'm in a bit of a bind."

“Yes.”

“I might go out on Christmas.”

“Yes.”

“Are you going to be okay being alone?”

“Yes.”

“The person is an old acquaintance, but this would be the first time we went out together.”

“Yes.”

“You’re not listening to me at all, are you?”

“Yes.”

“Um, do you want to drink some coffee?”

“Drink coffee.”

As soon as I said that, Aroe put aside the colored paper and paste that she had been absorbed in, and stood up quickly. I was past being amazed by her cold behavior and couldn’t help but laugh wryly.

I gave coffee to Aroe and juice to myself. We sat across from each other at the table. She didn't even look at the cookies on the plate, her eyes fixed on the cup. Aroe had been calmer recently compared to a while ago. Also, Fukazawa-kun, who always looked after her, was going to be there on Christmas day. She was going to be okay without me. So, it came down to whether I wanted to go, or not.

What should I really do? No, I knew the answer, but I was still hesitating.

It was Monday the next day that I finally decided to go. I ran after Tsukishima-kun after work, and when I told him, he looked surprised and smiled happily. I was concerned about making a reservation, but he told me not to worry and just look forward to the day.

That day, I bought a new coat and boots.

Part 5

December 24th. It started snowing lightly from around noon. By the time Fukazawa-kun came to pick up Aroe at my house in the evening, it was snowing heavily.

He had brought his girlfriend with him. She was a cheerful girl that Aroe and I had met a few times. When she saw Aroe, she said "You're so cute! You're so cute!" in delight. Aroe immediately repeated the same words.

It was still a little early for the party, so I let them in and gave them some tea. Fukazawa-kun's girlfriend said that she wanted to choose what Aroe was going to wear today. She went upstairs with Aroe.

Soon, I could hear the sound of the two of them talking cheerfully.

"She's really good at talking with Aroe. I'm surprised,"

"She has a good intuition. That's amazing. The tree is wonderful too."

Fukazawa-kun said as he looked at the Christmas decorations in the room.

Aroe had been completely captivated by crafting, so for the past week, she had been making countless chains of decorations and bringing them to me with a smile without me asking. So I had no choice but to put them up.

"It's become a habit now, hasn't it? She'll probably want to make them even after Christmas."

Fukazawa-kun narrowed his eyes, smiling amusedly.

"Speaking of which, it's your last Christmas Eve as a student this year, are you not doing anything private?"

"Because it's the last one, I wanted to spend it with everyone from school."

Fukazawa-kun said, looking a little lonely. He would graduate from university when the new year started. And after that, he had decided to go back to his parents' house and become a middle school teacher. He was a highly regarded volunteer, and would surely be a good teacher.

"It might be a little early, but, thank you for everything. Aroe is able to do many things because of you, Fukazawa-kun."

“No, I didn’t do much at all. It’s because everyone including Aroe and those around her did their best. I always feel like I’m lacking.”

Fukazawa-kun scratched his head, looking embarrassed.

“If you get fired from middle school, please come back.”

When I said that, Fukazawa-kun smiled, looking troubled.

Before long, Aroe, who had finished getting changed, came downstairs. The clothes she had picked out had a much better sense of style than I had. She looked cuter than usual even though it was the same clothes.

And once they had left, the house suddenly became quiet. Now that I thought about it, Aroe was always around when I was at home. I couldn’t clearly remember when I was last alone.

I took a shower and washed my body carefully. It felt a little embarrassing, but it was just my imagination, and it was just normal grooming for an adult woman. That was all. I was definitely choosing the best underwear. Definitely.

Then, I did my make up, set my hair. When I was choosing what to wear again, I had run out of time. I was supposed to be taking my time. Tsukishima-kun was going to pick me up in his car. I decided on my outfit in a hurry, put on my coat and finished preparing. When I sat down on my chair, I was strangely nervous and a second now felt like a very long time. The ticking of the clock seemed to be much slower than

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continue

usual. Every time a car passed by on the road outside, I thought it might be him and felt like getting up.

Soon, his car arrived. I got into the car. I knew the streets, but I couldn’t remember where we had driven. When I got out of the car in front of the small Italian restaurant near the station, I finally understood where we were.

Following Tsukishima-kun’s large back, I went inside. I could hear quiet and elegant music. Soon after we sat down, champagne was brought and poured into our glasses. Bubbles were swimming from the bottom to the surface in the pink liquid inside the tall glasses. We clinked our glasses together gently and took a sip.

It was delicious, and when I checked the label, it was a brand I had heard somewhere before. Was it expensive? Thinking so made me so nervous that I had no idea what I was eating.

When we had almost finished eating, we were slowly drinking our second bottle of champagne and talking about our high school days. When Tsukishima-kun was spending his after school in the baseball club covered in sweat, I was in the art club covered in the smell of turpentine.

When I asked him about the girl he was going out with back then, he asked me about the boy that I was close with in return. It felt like a very long time ago. It was a time when we thought we knew everything, but we didn't know anything at all.

“You seemed really mature back then, but you still seem like a mature person, Yasaka-san,”

“Does that mean I look old?”

“No, it doesn’t.”

Tsukishima-kun’s cheeks, slightly reddened from the alcohol, relaxed.

An adult wasn't supposed to be getting so carried away on a date and have no idea what they were eating. Even though I had been treated to such expensive food.

If that was how I seemed, it was because I was good at pretending to be an adult. I was always troubled by my childish and selfish self. If I had told him that,

“So, you’re all flustered today,”

He said, looking a little surprised. I realized that I had said something I shouldn't have.

“I’m going to go to the bathroom!”

I grabbed my handbag, unable to bear the embarrassment, and hurriedly left the table. When I looked in the mirror, my face was much redder than Tsukishima-kun's. I cooled my hands with the water flowing from the faucet, took a deep breath, and calmed myself down. It had been since New Years this year that I had drank any alcohol, so it had been almost a year. I was feeling light and happy. Was it just because of the alcohol?

"They said there was some cake left,"

When I returned, there was a delicious-looking cake on the table.

"But, I'm already full."

"Yeah. Let's get it wrapped up."

Tsukishima-kun called over a waiter and the cake was taken away.

“The snow’s gotten a lot heavier, hasn’t it. We’ll need a snow plow tomorrow if it keeps up like this.”

Following his gaze, I looked out the window. Feathery snow was falling slowly. If I had to shovel the snow, I would have to buy a new shovel. Aroe had lost last year's one somewhere when she was playing with it. I had to teach her properly this year, or she would do the same thing again.

“Your sister…”

He suddenly muttered.

“Huh?”

When I turned my face to him, Tsukishima-kun was looking straight at me.

“When do you have to pick up your sister today?”

I was about to answer that the volunteer person was going to look after her until tomorrow, but I realized the meaning behind his serious expression. If I said that I didn’t have to pick her up today, he understood what my intention would be.

Seeing my expression stiffen, Tsukishima-kun relaxed his expression and picked up his glass. He had given me time to think. I was relieved.

But, what should I do, what should I do? That was the only thing going round and round in my head and I couldn’t think properly.

“Ah, I’ll ask the person who’s looking after her.”

Forcing a smile, I picked up my cell phone. My heart was beating quickly, and I could feel the blood rushing to my face. I was too nervous. This wasn't something I didn't expect, and I didn't have any reason to reject it. What was I flustering about?

I called, trying to buy myself time to get my act together.

Fukazawa-kun picked up after the fifth ring.

“Is that Yasaka-san?”

His tone was unusually stiff.

“Yes, but has Aroe done anything?”

“No, nothing. She’s okay. Please don’t worry.”

Something was wrong.

“If anything has happened, please tell me.”

“I really mean it. I was just surprised by the sudden call…”

I didn’t think so at all. It was true that his tone had returned to normal. But I couldn’t get rid of my unease. And his voice was unusually quiet in the background. Where was he?

I met Tsukishima-kun’s gaze. I was sorry that I had unintentionally made such a serious expression and looked away before continuing.

“Something has happened, hasn’t it. And, the fact that you can’t tell me means that it’s not something that happened to Aroe, it’s that Aroe did something, right?”

“Oh man, you’re really…”

“Please tell me where you are.”

When I said that in a stern tone, he hesitated before saying,

“I’m sorry, I’m at Kakizaki hospital.”

“Hospital… Where’s Aroe?”

“She’s with me.”

After hearing that, I hung up and looked at Tsukishima-kun.

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t worry about it.”

He shook his head and stood up quickly.

“Something happened to your sister, right? Let’s go. I’ll go with you.”

“Thank you, but I’m going to go alone. It’s better if I go alone.”

“Okay.”

“I’m sorry for today. I was happy that you invited me.”

“Yeah.”

I could clearly read the disappointment in his smile and my heart ached. My new coat and boots felt unusually hard.

On the way in the taxi, I received a call from Fukazawa-kun.

“Everything’s okay, so please just take your time.”

There was no way I could do that. I told him that I was already on my way to the hospital. It wasn’t a long distance, so I arrived quickly.

When I went to the emergency entrance, where only one light was on, Fukazawa-kun was standing at the entrance. He was wearing his everyday clothes with no jacket on. His hands were in his pockets and he was shivering, breathing out white air, looking cold. When I called out to him,

“You can’t use your phone inside,”

He said with trembling lips.

He had come here in an ambulance. The injured person was his girlfriend. She had fallen on the concrete and hit her waist. There were no bone fractures, but she wasn't in a condition where she could get up straight away. She had taken painkillers and had just fallen asleep.

"She slipped on the snow that had piled up on the stairs."

At first, that was all he said. When I pressed him further, it turned out that Aroe was the cause. Aroe had suddenly pulled on the clothes of his girlfriend, who was about to go up the stairs, causing her to lose her balance. She fell down the stairs as a result.

"It was our fault that we weren't paying attention. We should have known that Aroe-chan sometimes grabs clothes and arms when she wants to call out to someone,"

He said, warming his hands with a paper cup filled with a steaming liquid.

The act itself was something that children would often do, but Aroe wasn't a child anymore. She was the same height as Fukazawa-kun's girlfriend, or even slightly taller. If she was suddenly pulled while in the middle of the stairs, even if someone was being careful, the fall would have been unavoidable.

I felt a chill and my back went cold. If something had been just a little off, it could have easily led to a much worse outcome.

"I'm sorry."

"No, please don't apologize. We're the ones who are sorry that something like this happened on a Christmas we were all looking forward to."

"It's not like that."

"Even though I was with them. Aroe-chan was just doing what she always does. But still. Maybe I'm just not cut out for this. I'm going to spend the night here. Yasaka-san, you should go home. You have to put Aroe-chan to bed at a reasonable time."

He tried to cheer me up with a smile, but it didn't seem as strong as usual. Then he sipped what was in the cup.

I saw him lose his confidence and break down for the first time. I knew how shocked he was. I thought I should say something, but I didn't know what to say given the situation and my role in it.

Aroe was sitting on the hospital bench reading a picture book. A young nurse was sitting next to her, looking after her.

"I'm her sister,"

"You're her sister? She wasn't able to calm down until just now, but she seems to like this picture book and has been looking at it seriously."

“I see, thank you for taking care of her.”

“They said she has autism, right? It must be hard taking care of such a big child at home all the time. What do you do when she has a panic attack?”

“Well, we somehow manage. My sister isn’t that strong.”

“They said that your parents aren’t at home either. That must be hard.”

“……”

“If possible, you should talk properly and take care of her together. In the end, the family has to be united. But, I know it’s not that easy. It’s hard, isn’t it. You’re all dressed up. You were going somewhere today, weren't you?”

Feeling pitied made me feel even more miserable. Aroe didn’t notice that we were talking about her right next to her. She was still looking at the picture book. She probably didn’t understand what she had done.

“Aroe, stop it.”

Aroe looked up.

“We’re going home. Stop it now.”

“No.”

After saying that, she looked back at the picture book.

“Stop it.”

Even when I said it sternly, Aroe didn’t reply.

“Can’t you hear me?”

“Can’t hear me.”

“She really likes it. Do you want to stay here a little longer?”

Before I knew it, Fukazawa-kun was next to me. We were making him worry even in this situation. I felt ashamed.

“It’s okay. Look, stop it now.”

“No.”

I couldn’t handle that reply anymore, and took the picture book from Aroe’s lap. I grabbed Aroe’s hand as she reached out to grab it back.

“Aroe, we’re going home.”

Aroe, finally sensing that something was wrong because of my tone, made an uneasy expression and

“Aroe going home,”

She murmured to herself. I handed the picture book back to the nurse.

“Yasaka-san…”

Fukazawa-kun was looking at me worriedly.

“I’m really sorry for today.”

I bowed my head and then pulled Aroe, who was still looking at the picture book with regret, strongly by the hand.

Part 6

I was slumped over the table in my chair. I was irritated, but I was more tired than anything. My body felt heavy as if I had been tied up with chains.

Aroe wanted to take a bath as she did when she got home late. When I filled the tub, she went in by herself. I had to call Tsukishima-kun to apologize, but I was feeling overwhelmed and couldn’t possibly do it.

My coat, which I had thrown on the table, was crumpled and still damp from the snow. I knew it would be all wrinkled if I left it, but I couldn't bring myself to pick it up and hang it on a hanger. The elegant decorations looked very hateful to me. I wanted to burn it right now, if I could. I hated that I had been so excited. Why had I been so mistaken in thinking that I could step away from my everyday life?

I was getting teary over something so stupid and felt pathetic.

Seriously, I shouldn’t be trying things I’m not used to doing. I laughed at myself, and then remembered how I behaved in the hospital. I had been so emotional and pathetic. I had to go to the hospital tomorrow to apologize to them properly. I had let them get hurt. I should also get something suitable as a gift. I had to pull myself together.

Aroe came out of the bath. She had forgotten to put on clothes and was completely naked. Her white skin was flushed a light pink from the hot water. She was completely soaked

because she hadn’t dried herself, and she walked on her tiptoes, scattering water droplets. There were still clumps of soap in her hair and on her breasts because she hadn’t rinsed properly. However, she was wearing the communication book, which was precious to her, around her neck.

She sat down on her usual chair. Then she flipped through her book, and as usual, frowned as she made a difficult expression.

“Coffee please,”

Aroe said.

“Coffee please.”

“Coffee please.”

“Coffee please.”

“Coffee please.”

She repeated it endlessly as I stayed silent. She wasn't angry, and she wasn't rushing me. She was just repeating it calmly.

Even though she didn't have the skills to change the impression of words by changing her tone, if she repeated it so persistently, I could get an idea of what she was trying to say. If I left her like this, Aroe would probably start shaking the chair and protesting. She was unhappy that I wasn't giving her coffee. But I was just as unhappy as she was. Sometimes, Aroe could try to be considerate of me.

Also, her tone was so emotionless, like a robot. I started to wonder if she even had a heart inside her. I thought she did, but even if she did, it would be a heart that shared very little with mine. We couldn’t understand each other’s feelings.

Her heart couldn’t connect with anyone. So, what was the purpose of her heart? Feelings that couldn’t be conveyed to anyone were only painful, weren’t they? How could Aroe endure it? I couldn’t imagine it.

When I faced Aroe, her heart and my heart didn’t connect at all and I felt as lonely as if I was looking at the darkness.

“Coffee please,”

Aroe’s eyes were starting to look suspicious as she looked at the book. She would start getting angry soon. If she wanted to have a tantrum, she should have one. As I thought that,

“Achoo,”

She sneezed.

“Coffee please,”

She continued with a serious expression. If she stayed naked in this cold kitchen, she would surely catch a cold. I gave up. I was defeated and stood up.

I made coffee for her, and then got a towel and her clothes.

As I dried her body with a towel, she was drinking her coffee, making a face that I couldn't tell if she found it delicious or not. I touched her skin. The surface was cold from the air in the room, but I could feel warmth coming from deep inside.

She was alive, a foolishly obvious thought popped into my head. This child, who couldn't live alone, needed someone with her at all times, but didn't seem to know how to protect herself from loneliness. She didn't even know what a person was. Even I, who was next to her, was not seen as the same kind of person. She had nothing to protect herself with, only her soft skin that she was born with, and she was living. I didn't know if she had a heart or not, but it was true that she was alive.

"Thank you for the meal,"

Aroe smiled, looking satisfied.

I put clothes on her after she had finished her coffee, and put her to bed. Then, I took a bath and went to bed. The cool sheets were comfortable after my bath and I melted into sleep in a matter of moments.

In the moment before my consciousness was swallowed by the darkness,

"From tomorrow, I'll do my best with Aroe, just the two of us,"

I murmured quietly.

"I won't do anything else."

As long as I was alive, I wasn't allowed to give up or rest no matter what happened. That's probably how life was. It was probably uncool to give up when all I had to do was endure.

I told myself that over and over again.

But maybe, if Tsukishima-kun invited me again, I would go, I thought. It should be fine to do at least that much.

And then, I fell asleep.

—Soon after that, the earthquake struck.

to be continued...